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(in the figurative sense) more readily at meal-time than at any other.

Goncourt was unable to help his friend in this matter, at all events immediately; so Zola turned to another subject which he mentioned on the same occasion, that of a strike in a mining district, such as was in progress among the pitmen of northern France at that very moment. Forthwith he started for the scene of the trouble. "At Valenciennes since Saturday, among the strikers, who are remarkably calm," he wrote in February, 1884.

"A splendid country as a scene for my book," This time his subject fairly carried him away. "He spent," says Mr. Sherard, "the best part of six months in travelling about, note-book in hand, through the various mining districts of the north of France and of Belgium, interviewing miners, exploring mines from pit-mouth to lowest depths, attending political meetings among the miners, studying various types of Socialist lecturers, drinking horrible beer and still more horrible brandy in the forlorn *cabarets* of the *corons* [miners' villages], interrogating miners' wives, and wandering about the fields in the neighbourhood of these *corons* to watch the lads and lassies taking their poor pastimes when the day's drudgery was over."¹

Some eight or nine years subsequently,
Mr. Sherard,
on visiting the Borinage, as the coal district
round Mons
is called, fell in with an old *porion* or "viewer
" who had
acted as one of Zola's guides, and who
pronounced him
to have been the most inquisitive gentleman
he had ever
met. Never had he known anybody who
asked more
questions, said he, unless, indeed, it were an
investigating

i Sherard, *I. a.*, p. 203.